



For better or worse? Community relations initiatives in Northern Ireland

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The last ten years have seen the most sustained attempt by the British government to address the underlying problems of segregation and division in Northern Ireland through a reexamination of public policy issues (housing, education, and employment). This paper examines the contribution of one such policy initiative, a "bottom-up" approach to community relations under the auspices of the Central Community Relations Unit. Official evaluations of twenty-two projects are reviewed and assessed against principles of good practice emerging from a growing body of theoretical literature on effective intergroup contact.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE? COMMUNITY RELATIONS INITIATIVES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

by Joanne Hughes and Colin Knox

Attempts at macro-level solutions to the problem of Northern Ireland continue to focus on attaining a constitutional settlement which will satisfy the warring Unionist and Nationalist factions, and end the bloodshed and bombing so characteristic of the province for more than a quarter of a century. Underlying this process is an ongoing policy commitment on the part of the U.K. government to achieving "equality and equity" between the two communities in Northern Ireland. A series of reforms, introduced in the 1980s, have targeted social, economic, political, and security issues. Alongside and complementing these, another set of measures have been aimed at alleviating deep-rooted community divisions.

Central to the implementation of these measures was the establishment in September 1987 of the Northern Ireland Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU). Reporting directly to the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, the Unit is charged with "bringing the two sides of the community toward greater understanding."¹ The importance attributed to the Unit is evidenced by the fact that in 1995-96 it received £5.3 million out of total government expenditures of £8.4 million for Northern Ireland on community rela-

tions and cultural traditions.² Since its inception, the CCRU has implemented, funded, and evaluated a broad spectrum of community relations initiatives. In an effort to engender public support within a politically sensitive minefield, the Unit has had to tread very carefully. Specific goals for programs have been framed in fairly generic terms, concentrating primarily on facilitating contact between Protestants and Catholics. The approach adopted is influenced by the hypothesis that cross-community contact can assist in improving tolerance for diverse cultural traditions. This "contact model" is based on theories of intergroup and interpersonal behavior emanating from the work of U.S. social psychologists during the 1970s. Increased contact between Protestants and Catholics within the difficult sociopolitical context of Northern Ireland appears to be a laudable goal. There is some evidence which has challenged the conventional wisdom that contact *in and of itself* is sufficient to effect long-term attitudinal and behavioral change.³ It is argued that the quality of, and the conditions under which contact takes place, as opposed to its extent, are more important determinants of successful outcomes.

This paper has four main aims: (1) to consider the body of theoretical literature on interpersonal and intergroup contact, and the concomitant principles of good practice which have emerged from it; (2) to highlight the emergence and role of the CCRU within the context of the British government's approach to community relations in Northern Ireland; (3) to categorize the broad range of projects supported by the CCRU and subject them to a "matching" exercise wherein their relative contribution to effective contact is assessed according to the principles of good practice emerging from the theoretical literature; and (4) in light of the empirical data to suggest how good practice can best be effected. This research review is based on evaluations commissioned by the Central Community Relations Unit and conducted by independent consultants on twenty-two cross-community and single identity projects in Northern Ireland.

THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS

In an effort to address the underlying community divisions which have served to bolster conflict and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, the CCRU is committed both to promoting a community relations agenda and to supporting grass-roots initiatives. To this end, the following key objectives have been defined for each grant-aided project:

- To create structures which will permit a greater degree of cross-community contact;
- To implement effective ways of addressing community conflict issues; and
- To increase mutual respect within and between different parts of the community.⁴

Each objective is intended to build incrementally on the previous action. The first, considered achievable in the short term, identifies the need for encouragement of basic low-level contact. The second refers to the processes through which contact can successfully tackle the problems of conflict, and the final objective (mutual understanding) is presented as a long-term outcome.

The rationale behind this approach to community relations was first proposed by Yehuda Amir as early as 1954. His contact hypothesis argues that intergroup hostility and conflict exist largely because members of each group (Protestant and Catholic) hold inaccurate negative stereotypes or prejudiced attitudes toward the other group. Thus, since the problem is largely due to ignorance, it can be addressed through contact which will enable individuals to understand that they are essentially similar in many respects.⁵ There have been many attempts to test and verify the central tenets of Amir's analysis.⁶ Most efforts supported his theory provided that contact took place within conditions conducive to a positive outcome. Such conditions were summarized as follows by Amir, who conducted a review of the burgeoning body of research on contact:

- Participants within the confines of the contact situation have equal status and the contact experience does not result in a reduced status position for one group;
- Participants represent the majority group and higher status members of the minority group;
- There is institutional support for contact at the macro level and the prevailing social climate is favorable;
- Contact is "intimate" as opposed to superficial or casual;
- Contact is noncompetitive, pleasant, and rewarding; and
- Members of both groups cooperate, though with functionally distinct roles, in pursuit of "superordinate goals."⁷

Although the contact hypothesis stood for over three decades, the last fifteen years have seen the emergence of research which questions the ability of contact alone to improve attitudes and behavior. Scholars and practitioners have proposed alternative models for understanding the dynamics of group relations.

W. G. Stephan and C. W. Stephan, for example, argue, on the basis of empirical data, that contact has the potential not only to improve attitudes toward other groups but also to exacerbate prejudice, depending on the nature, content, and scope of the conflict. They suggest that, for best results, the contact situation should concentrate not only on what makes groups similar but also on what divides them: "Information about real differences should respect the cultures and traditions of other groups and should be supported by information which explodes myths about false difference."⁸

Furthermore, a review conducted by Rupert Brown indicates that even when Amir's "ideal conditions" were satisfied, questions have been raised regarding the scope of improved attitudes and the extent to which they can be extrapolated from the individual in the contact situation to the group which he/she represents. Brown believes that the contact hypothesis has three main failings. First, it is based on the premise that prejudice is a result of ignorance or lack of understanding. Empirical research, however, has identified other contributory factors, including the conflicts of interests and differential status positions which characterize many of the groups

involved in conflict situations. These are environmental and institutional factors which cannot be addressed through contact alone.⁹ A case in point is clearly Northern Ireland where the Catholic minority community has historically been marginalized by a powerful majority Protestant community, and where the political aspirations of Nationalists and Unionists reflect conflicting political allegiances.

Second, the contact hypothesis fails to take account of "normative and informational forces" at work during the contact experience which pressure participants to conform. That is, people often respond to cultural norms of politeness, desiring acceptance. This means that they avoid issues deemed potentially volatile out of fear for how their actions will be interpreted by others. Even when new information presented to participants during the contact experience does succeed in altering attitudes, this positive shift does not necessarily extend to the wider network of "own group" members. Indeed, upon reentry into their own community, even those whose views have been genuinely affected may find the price of dissension from group norms too high. Thus, informational influences in one context are outweighed by normative influences in another.¹⁰

Finally, the contact hypothesis, in emphasizing interpersonal as opposed to intergroup relations, fails to acknowledge the importance of group identity. There is a qualitative difference between an individual's behavior at interpersonal and intergroup levels. Such context-specific behavior means that friendships forged at the interpersonal level need not present a challenge to existing group stereotypes. This is because individuals, among whom there may be mutual attraction, treat each other as exceptions to the group norm. Because such friends are viewed as exceptional cases, prejudiced attitudes toward the group as a whole remain intact and can resurface within the context of intergroup relations.¹¹ "Some of my best friends are Catholic/Protestant" is a common statement in Northern Ireland.

ATTRIBUTION AND CATEGORIZATION THEORIES

Underpinning the criticisms leveled at the contact model is a recognition that the dynamics of group processes as opposed to interactions between individuals are, to a large extent, responsible for the perpetuation of conflict and hostility. In explaining the importance of group identity, Brown points to attribution and categorization theories. These approaches, developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, suggest that individuals inherently divide the world into social categories in order to simplify and make sense of multilayered information, and also to help locate themselves in relation to others. The "cognitive biases" emerging from this categorization process include stereotyping (when traits are attributed to members of other groups even when there is no objective grounds for doing so) and memory distortions (when information regarding the negative attributes of another group is more easily remembered than positive characteristics). Thus, the mere fact of belonging to a group is enough to generate hostility toward others, regardless of conflicting goals or disputes. As Brown notes, "Discriminatory inter-group behavior arising from simply being assigned to one category rather than another, and independent of any objective relationships between groups, is remarkably easy to observe."¹²

Categorization processes explain why individuals differentiate between groups but not why there is consistently positive in-group bias. To explain this, Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown propose the social identity theory. Based on the work of Tajfel and Turner, the theory identifies a link between an individual's self-esteem and his/her perception of group identity, i.e., people aspire to positive self-esteem and therefore they attribute positive characteristics to their own group. In order to arrive at a more positive identity, comparisons are made with other groups and, according to Brown, "because we value positive self-esteem it follows that a bias will enter our evaluation of out-groups thus enabling us to find characteristics which positively distinguish our group from others." Since self-esteem is linked to group identity, the outcome of such comparison is critical "if our own group can be perceived as clearly

superior on some dimension of value (like skill or sociability) then, we, too, can bask in that reflected glory.” In the light of the social identity approach, Brown argues that negative attitudes toward other groups can only be adequately addressed through contact if the emphasis is on intergroup relations. In other words, the group identity of participating individuals must be made salient during the contact situation.¹³

THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS REVISED

On the basis of social identity theory, Hewstone and Brown argue that in order for contact under micro conditions to have any long-term effect on intergroup relations, the following four conditions should be satisfied:

1. *Superordinate goals.* When groups perceive conflicting goals, this tends to be reflected in intergroup relations which are imbued with prejudice. Thus, for contact to be successful, participants must all aspire toward the same goal or goals, the achievement of which would not be possible through the individual efforts of either group working alone.
2. *Cooperation.* Cooperative activity is sometimes resisted by individuals because it may entail the blurring of distinctive group boundaries. This can introduce an element of threat, particularly when groups are of varying size. Thus, it is important that each group have a distinctive role which allows it to maintain something of its own identity during the joint activity.
3. *Cross-cutting social categories.* Each individual identifies with a number of social groups other than those which inform religious and ethnic identity (e.g., sports clubs, workplace cohorts, and mothers and toddlers groups). By stressing cross-cutting identities during the contact activity, it is possible to undermine the tensions caused by the original divisions.
4. *Equal status through expectations.* Due to differential status positions within the broader social context, it is often difficult to achieve equal status within the contact situation. Thus, the expectations of participants should be appropriately adjusted prior to contact. This condition clearly has ramifications for single identity work wherein

the potential exists to address perceptions of inferiority and lack of confidence.¹⁴

The conditions proposed by Hewstone and Brown focus on the intrinsic nature of the contact situation. Ronald Fisher adopts a more holistic approach when he argues that the contact hypothesis be broadened to encompass the following:

- Individual prejudice, while important, is not at the core of intergroup conflict; rather it can be attributed to institutional segregation and discrimination;
- Prejudice is based on a variety of psychological processes and is embedded in the culture of society;
- Education is an insufficient means of addressing prejudice; institutional change is needed to require new intergroup behavior and to reshape intergroup attitudes.

Fisher acknowledges the value of the contact hypothesis and suggests that attempting to undertake institutional change without also addressing interpersonal prejudices and negative social attitudes is unwise because, without a twin-track approach, attempts at institutional change will be met with fear and mistrust.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Peter Lemish argues that despite limitations, contact at a micro level is better than no contact at all. He underlines the fact that the obverse of contact is segregation and that, if groups or their representatives do not meet, their prejudices remain unchallenged and thus make it simpler for them to continue a hostile campaign of violence.¹⁶

Building on the contact hypothesis and taking into account Fisher's propositions, Clem McCartney has developed the "Contact Triangle Model." This model suggests that contact can be progressively built upon to the extent that participants start to address macro-level problems such as conflict and segregation. Represented in the form of a pyramid, the model identifies the following four levels of contact work ranging from basic (level 1) to advanced (level 4):

level 1, basic introductory and exploration contact;

level 2, contact which takes place within the context of common issues (facilitating the achievement of Hewstone and Brown's conditions);

level 3, contact where common, but divisive, issues can be raised within an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect (the intergroup focus); and

level 4, conflict management contact, where groups build on respect for cultural diversity in order to address conflict issues.¹⁷

Progress from one level to the next should be conditioned on the contact requirements of the previous level(s) having been satisfied. Single identity work can contribute to the attainment of the first three levels; however, as progress is made, it diminishes in importance.

The structured approach to contact emphasized in this theoretical review may have important ramifications for community relations policies in Northern Ireland, especially in relation to the work supported by the Central Community Relations Unit. We will now examine the extent to which CCRU projects meet the challenges highlighted above. Prior to any overall assessment, however, it is important to consider the macro and largely institutional approach to community relations within which the CCRU emerged.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONTEXT

Community relations is not a new policy issue in Northern Ireland, though its emergence has been beset with problems. The first major attempt at improving relations between the Protestants and Catholics took place in the early 1970s, when a Ministry of Community Relations and an independent Community Relations Commission were established but had no success.¹⁸ Reaction to its reemergence as a key public policy in 1987 ranged from support, suspicion, and acquiescence to trenchant opposition from the province's main political parties.

The largely Catholic and Nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) argued that the absence of trust was at the heart of Northern Ireland's problems and that any improvement in

community relations would come only when trust was restored. Sinn Féin, a more radical republican party, was ambivalent toward a policy which sought reconciliation through constructive dialogue and debate. The latter claimed that this could not take place until the (largely Protestant) Unionist majority veto in the six counties was removed. The Alliance Party, comprising both Protestants and Catholics, and representing the more conciliatory elements in both groups, fully endorsed constructive community relations work designed to promote understanding and trust. Responses from the two Unionist parties ranged from qualified support in the case of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to opposition on the part of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). While the UUP supported plans to encourage the affirmation and exploration of local regional identities, it claimed that undue emphasis on commonalities could obscure the reality of a culturally polarized community. The DUP saw the promotion of good community relations as no more than a political gimmick by government ministers, one in which public money was squandered on overrated reconciliation schemes. Good community relations should be the elimination of terrorism.¹⁹

Despite the degree of opposition or ambivalence expressed by local political parties, a proposal for a Central Community Relations Unit found ministerial support. Established in September 1987, the unit has three broadly defined roles:

- challenge*, to ensure that major policy decisions are made only after careful evaluation of their possible effects on community relations;
- review*, to carry out periodic reviews of the most important policies and programs to assess their impact on community relations; and
- innovation*, to develop new ideas about improving community relations and about how best to support those mediators working to improve relations and reduce prejudice.

These roles are set within the context of government policy on community relations, which has three main objectives: (1) to ensure that everyone enjoys equality of opportunity and equity of treatment; (2) to increase the level of cross-community contact;

and (3) to encourage greater mutual understanding and respect for diverse cultural traditions.²⁰

Juxtaposed with, and complementing the work of the Unit, there followed a number of equality and equity measures, including the Targeting Social Need Initiative, aimed at reducing social and economic differentials; the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989, outlawing discrimination in the workplace; schemes such as Making Belfast/Derry Work, regenerating inner city ghettos; and the Rural Development Initiative, revitalizing deprived rural areas.

A cultural traditions program was also established to support the arts, museums, and Irish language groups in a way that encouraged respect for the richness and diversity of shared cultural heritage. In an attempt to target children and young adults during the formative years, a cross-community contact initiative, administered by the Department of Education, was designed to establish and develop contacts between schools, youth, and community groups. This action paralleled educational reforms. In line with changes in Great Britain, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) introduced a major program of educational revitalization and a new common curriculum in September 1990. Unique to the Northern Ireland efforts were two cross-curricular themes concerning education for mutual understanding (EMU) and courses on cultural heritage which became mandatory (from September 1992) in the teaching of most academic subjects. Education for mutual understanding aims, *inter alia*, to help children learn "to respect themselves and others" and "to know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultural traditions."²¹ Although interschool contact is not viewed as compulsory for the achievement of these goals, it is strongly recommended.²² While the EMU project has been developed within the segregated schools in Northern Ireland, the last ten years have also seen the emergence of planned integrated schools. The latter were founded by parents keen to ensure that their children were educated in a mixed environment. They operate on the principle that enrollment of Protestants and Catholics should not deviate significantly from a 50/50 ratio.

Such a cursory overview does not do justice to the detail of the programs or the bodies involved. Our aim, however, is not to consider these projects in depth but to provide a context for the activity currently undertaken and supported by the Central Community Relations Unit, which has both initiated and/or funded large-scale community relations efforts (e.g., the District Council Community Relations Programme) and promoted small-scale projects that have emerged as a result of local community efforts (e.g., Families Against Intimidation and Terror).

Due to the nature and scope of some of the projects, and the variety of institutions and individuals employed to undertake CCRU assessments, evaluation reports are of uneven quality. Some are in-depth analyses based on tried-and-tested techniques; others are no more than impressionistic accounts. All, however, have made some attempt to evaluate operational activities against the background of the CCRU's objectives. The following review takes the analysis one step further by considering the various modes of community relations activity against macro-level principles emerging from the research literature described above.

Our discussion is structured as follows: First, we describe the broad classification of projects supported by the Central Community Relations Unit and the rationale underpinning each type of activity. Second, we examine the key issues emerging from the various modes of community relations work in the light of principles for good practice. In the final section of the paper, we discuss how conclusions drawn from the review may contribute to the wider theoretical debate on the value of contact as a means of improving community relations in conflict situations.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. KEY RECONCILIATION GROUPS/AGENCIES²³

Groups (public, voluntary, independent) in this category were set up with a specific community relations or reconciliation brief.

Three programs were evaluated: the Community Relations Council (CRC), Corrymeela Community, and the District Council Community Relations Programme. All represent established institutional players in the community relations network. The Community Relations Council was established in 1990 to consolidate and coordinate some of the ongoing, but piecemeal, mediation work undertaken in Northern Ireland. Core funding costs are met by central government. Corrymeela Community is a Christian organization. Formed in 1965, it has its own residential center. Members are committed to healing religious, political, and social divisions in Northern Ireland. The center is currently used by about 8,000 people per year and seventy-five percent of its costs are met by the CCRU. The District Council Community Relations Programme is a central government initiative established in 1989. At the outset, the CCRU agreed to fund the program, provided councils agreed to participate on a cross-party basis and to employ a community relations officer.

Each group operates somewhat differently. Based in its residential center, Corrymeela concentrates primarily on reconciliation through structured contact. The CRC and the District Council Programme support activities ranging from high-profile publicity projects (e.g., Cavalcade of Song and drama productions with a community relations theme) through cultural traditions work (e.g., intercommunity traditional music seminars and workshops to explore "orange" and "green" traditions), to more focused attempts at addressing attitudinal and behavioral change (e.g., conflict resolution and antisectarian workshops). Support for such a wide range of activities is based on the premise that community relations should evolve at a pace which reflects the stages of development reached by participants. Attempts are then made to move relations to a more advanced level (the pyramid-type model expounded by McCartney).

2. COMMUNITY OR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Here, organizations, agencies, and projects were established originally with a clear community relations brief. Those efforts already studied by the Central Community Relations Unit include the Central Churches' Committee for Community Work, the Cornerstone Community, Harmony Community Trust, Co-operation North, the East Belfast Community Development Centre, and the City of Belfast YMCA.

The Central Churches' Committee for Community Work was formed in 1974 as an umbrella organization comprising representatives from the four main churches in Northern Ireland. The committee, which meets quarterly, was set up to project a symbol of unity among diverse cultural traditions in the face of increasing violence. The Cornerstone Community is a residential area established in 1981, located in the flashpoint zone of West Belfast. Its aim is to highlight sectarian division and address general economic and social deprivation. Harmony Community Trust is a registered charity which was set up in 1975. Based on a small farm (16 acres), the Trust provides for short stays for groups and individuals from Belfast's most deprived areas. Co-operation North was established in 1979 by representatives from a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in the North and South of Ireland. It is a nongovernmental organization which seeks to improve and increase peaceful cross-border contact. The East Belfast Community Development Centre was set up in 1990 and has its roots in the East Belfast Youth Council. Its goal is to improve the social and economic fabric of the area through the development of a self-help culture. The City of Belfast YMCA is part of the world-wide organization founded in 1844. The Belfast YMCA's motto is "mind, body and Spirit," with a special focus on sectarianism and societal division.

The main rationale informing the work of the above organizations is community development, typified by the objectives set by the East Belfast Centre to "work independently and in partnership with others to improve the social and economic fabric of the area by helping local people to help themselves."²⁴ Within these organizations there is a general preference for low-profile community

work, particularly in areas of high tension. Examples of such activities include drama and a range of social and life skills programs for women's groups and adults (East Belfast Centre, Harmony Community Trust); school-based history, religious, and cultural awareness projects (Harmony Community Trust, Central Churches' Committee for Community Work [CCCCW], City of Belfast YMCA); conferences, debates, and exchanges on common economic, social, and cultural concerns (Co-operation North, East Belfast Centre); prayer meetings, Bible classes, conferences, and seminars with a religious theme (CCCCW, City of Belfast YMCA, Cornerstone Community); and single identity cultural awareness projects (City of Belfast YMCA).

3. CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Bodies in this category are involved in the support of language and history as a means of promoting mutual respect and understanding of diverse cultures. Three groups have been evaluated by the CCRU: the Ulster Society, the Ultach Trust, and the Federation for Ulster Local Studies.

The Ulster Society was founded in 1895 by a group of interested academics, politicians, and historians. Its main aim is to promote British heritage and to revive Protestant culture. The Ultach Trust was established in 1989 with a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist membership. It is an independent body with the fundamental aim of advancing the Irish language, traditions, and cultural heritage. The Federation for Ulster Local Studies is an umbrella organization for six local history societies which evolved in Northern Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s. It was set up with the aim of advancing the study of local history.

The Ulster Society and the Ultach Trust are based largely within single identity traditions. The former represents the Protestant Unionist culture and the latter the Catholic, Nationalist culture. Both attempt to advance respect for their own traditions through workshops, seminars, and presentations, though little attempt is made at outreach work. The Federation of Ulster Local Studies

undertakes similar activities but adopts a more Province-wide approach. Its target participants are Protestants and Catholics who have a mutual interest in local history.

4. EDUCATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

These are projects, programs, or bodies with an education, training, personal development, or information-gathering mandate, *some* of which have a community relations component. Four groups fall into this category: the Woman's Education Project, the Ulster Quaker Service Committee, the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation, and the Irish School of Ecumenics.

The Woman's Education Project is a small, voluntary organization which was established in 1983. The central goal is to provide informal education and training opportunities. The Ulster Quaker Service Committee is a group formed in 1972 to provide services to those marginalized by the social conflict. The Columbanus Community of Reconciliation is a residential community based in Belfast. Set up in 1993 by a Jesuit priest, it is committed to an intellectual and religious approach to cross-community issues. The Irish School of Ecumenics was formed in 1970 by representatives from the main churches in Ireland. It has about 800 students drawn from both the North and South of Ireland.

This category of CCRU-evaluated organizations is best considered under two main headings, beginning with education and focusing on the Irish School of Ecumenics and the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation, both of which have their origins in the four main Churches in Northern Ireland (Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Church of Ireland). The Irish School of Ecumenics is an internationally recognized institute in which education is provided largely through a postgraduate program leading to a formal qualification. The Columbanus Community of Reconciliation promotes religious education through seminars, vigils, services, and talks. Both organizations endorse a model of education that promotes understanding of issues germane to the long-lived conflict, taught to those with a vested interest in the

intellectual underpinnings of cross-community issues (postgraduates, community workers, and training facilitators).

The second heading serves to highlight personal development: services offered by the Ulster Quaker Service Committee and the Woman's Education Project. Both focus on women. In the case of the Ulster Quakers, the target group is women under stress for political or domestic/social reasons (i.e., family/spouse in prison). Projects supported include a visitor's center at Maze and Magheraberry prisons, a family holiday scheme, and a cottage which offers respite to women in distress. In the Woman's Education Project, personal development is provided through improved access to formal education. Neither program espouses explicit cross-community objectives.

5. REACTIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Organizations in this category were established in response to specific paramilitary atrocities and in support of public moves toward peace and reconciliation. Programs include Families Against Intimidation and Terror, the Peace and Reconciliation Group (Derry), Enniskillen Together, the Community of the Peace People, the Peace Train Organization, and Women Together for Peace.

Families Against Intimidation and Terror was formed in 1990 as a response to intimidation and attacks by paramilitaries against those allegedly involved in "anti-social" activity. The aim is to provide a public voice of opposition. The Peace and Reconciliation Group (Derry) was established in 1976 to open channels of communication with top Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. Enniskillen Together was formed by the townspeople of Enniskillen as a response to the horror of an Irish Republican Army (IRA) bomb which exploded in the town on Remembrance Sunday, November 8, 1987, killing eleven people. The group's main objective is to promote better cross-community understanding. The Community of the Peace People was founded in 1976 by two Belfast women who had suffered personal tragedies in the conflict. At its inception, high-profile rallies were organized. More recent work has been small-scale and more tightly focused. The Peace Train

Organization was formed in 1989 and grew out of a sense of public outrage at the disruption caused by an IRA bombing campaign against the rail-link between Belfast and Dublin. The main activity of the organization consists of widely publicized symbolic train runs. Women Together for Peace was established in 1971 when a small group of women, despairing at increasing sectarian violence in Belfast, came together with the aim of building bridges between Protestants and Catholics.

All six organizations, to a greater or lesser extent, rely on voluntary help and are rooted in local communities. Recently formed groups such as the Peace Train Organization, Enniskillen Together, and Families Against Intimidation and Terror are largely driven by high-profile media-oriented goals, whereas longer-established groups (Women Together for Peace, the Community of the Peace People, and the Peace and Reconciliation Group [Derry]) have come to embrace a long-term development plan. Common activities include the staging of children's community holidays and mediation between opposing factions. The Community of the Peace People is also involved in the dissemination of national and international "peace" news through the magazine *Peace by Peace*.

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The discussion above provides an overview of the nature of projects supported by the Central Community Relations Unit. There is extensive diversity in the range of operational activities employed to facilitate the achievement of contact objectives. The following section takes the descriptive categorization one step further, attempting to rank projects according to their potential to satisfy principles of good practice for contact work. Such measurements include the encouragement of cross-cutting social dialogue; the raising of expectations for groups with low self-esteem (Hewstone and Brown); a structured approach to community relations which builds upon exploratory level contact eventually to address behavioral problems such as conflict and segregation (McCartney); and a

twin-track strategy that addresses both the institutional and psychological effects of conflict (Fisher and Lemish).

CONTRIBUTION TO EFFECTIVE CONTACT

(a) GOOD CONTRIBUTION TO CONDITIONS OF SUCCESSFUL CONTACT

Key reconciliation bodies: the Community Relations Council, Corrymeela Community, and the District Council Community Relations Programme.

Major reconciliation bodies are now well established with institutional status and professional staff. They are known to the public as key actors in the policy network and are an obvious source of advice and assistance on community relations. The importance of a top-down *and* bottom-up approach is stressed, such that grass-roots community ideas interface with a grander strategic vision. These groups have the resources and expertise to initiate and develop long-term programs within an established theoretical framework.

These organizations clearly have the most potential for effective community relations. Staff who deliver projects on the ground are professionally trained. They are aware of the theoretical debates surrounding community relations and, as a result, their work embraces many of the elements of good practice. Organizations in this category adopt an incremental approach wherein an assessment is made of the community relations status of each group that seeks funding. Financial support is conditional for those groups that have little or no experience undertaking basic level activities. As they progress, groups are encouraged to produce a more focused agenda which requires engagement at a cross-community level. Moreover, both the Community Relations Council and the District Council program have clearly defined strands of activity such as "community relations," "cultural traditions," and "training." Within each area of activity there is a set of objectives and a structured effort to facilitate the achievement of objectives on an incremental basis.

Over and above the dedicated work of the key reconciliation bodies, these initiatives also reflect the government's commitment to addressing, through community relations, the physical and psychological segregation which has for so long been characteristic of Northern Ireland. Activities undertaken by such groups complement the work of longer-established players in the institutional network (i.e., the Fair Employment Agency, Integrated Schools). This category, more than any other, must be seen as part of the macro-level, twin-track approach to community relations endorsed by Fisher and Lemish.

(b) A QUALIFIED CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY RELATIONS OBJECTIVES

Community or economic development carried out by the Central Churches' Committee for Community Work, the Cornerstone Community, Harmony Community Trust, Co-operation North, the East Belfast Community Development Centre; and the City of Belfast YMCA. Cultural traditions nurtured by the Ulster Society, the Ultaich Trust, and the Federation for Ulster Local Studies.

Here the potential exists for more dynamic and proactive programs. In other words, CCRU evaluations portrayed both good and bad practices in using community/economic development as a way to explore different social issues. The community development issues (such as poverty and disability) addressed by Harmony Community Trust and the strategies employed by activists using religious and deprivation indices from the Cornerstone Community have successfully provided "superordinate goals" and "cross-cutting social categories" to encourage cooperation between Protestants and Catholics. The dynamics involved in this process have served to improve relationships to an extent where intergroup issues (religion and politics) have been addressed as they arise in the course of community development. The Cornerstone Community has established residential groups comprising participants strategically drawn from adjacent and deprived Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. This ensures a balance within the groups that is consistent with the religious demography of the area.

In the case of the City of Belfast YMCA, community relations work is at a preliminary phase only, though there is recognition that contact work must be a long-term aim. The East Belfast Community Development Centre, on the other hand, has been no more than a token participant in mediation efforts, with little, if any, community relations content in its program. It was equally difficult to separate the social and economic roles of Co-operation North from any explicit community relations policy. This underlines the fact that the very flexibility upon which community development work is based (allowing participants to dictate the agenda) can actually militate against divisive issues being addressed. The point at which community development ends and community relations begins is difficult to locate in practice.

Cultural traditions programs have also produced mixed results. The Federation for Ulster Local Studies successfully promotes Protestant-Catholics cooperation in pursuit of common goals involving local history and cultural heritage. Since cultural traditions are a historically divisive and contentious area, the very nature of the Federation's work creates conditions conducive to tolerance and understanding at an intergroup level. The Ultach Trust and the Ulster Society have elements in their work which, if appropriately handled, could contribute to the advancement of community relations. Both, for example, target single identity communities with the aim of promoting cultural awareness. However, neither group appears committed to a cross-community agenda. Indeed, cultural superiority is frequently espoused, creating expectations that clearly have the potential to exacerbate and reinforce prejudice. Allied to this are glimpses of political motives underpinning the mission of both organizations.

The key issue then is how quickly the balance should shift from an emphasis on a "within" community focus to cross-community activities. As demonstrated by the Federation of Ulster Local Studies, history and cultural heritage can be used successfully to generate social cohesion. Where there is no cross-community momentum, however, there is a danger that such bodies are perceived as no more than politically motivated actors masquerading

as cultural/educational organizations. The conditions advocated by Hewstone and Brown are satisfied only when groups know and understand that they are involved in community relations activity. An explicit proactive agenda is therefore of paramount importance. Unfortunately, much community development and cultural traditions work founders because that agenda either does not exist or is paid lip-service for the purposes of securing funding.

(c) LEAST SUCCESSFUL CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Education and personal development (Women's Education Project, the Ulster Quaker Service Committee, the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation, and the Irish School of Ecumenics) combine with reactive community relations (Families Against Intimidation and Terror, the Peace and Reconciliation Group [Derry], Enniskillen Together, the Community of the Peace People, the Peace Train Organization, and Women Together for Peace).

Education and personal development schemes have little to commend them. The former (the Irish School of Ecumenics, the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation) can be criticized as having a rather elitist approach with a very limited target population. In its defense, the Irish School of Ecumenics selects those viewed as leaders and community activists who are likely to be influential and whose education will ultimately permeate their work and "trickle down" to the community level. The CCRU evaluations, however, raise some questions as to whether such a link is, as yet, established, and the main thrust of such programs is directed at an interpersonal level with emphasis on improving awareness among individual participants.

Personal development programs (Quaker Cottage and Woman's Education Project) would also have some difficulty in establishing their value as community relations efforts. Both programs are aimed at women who are disadvantaged at a social, economic, and educational level. Community relations may be another variable in the overall projects but remains a relatively unimportant one.

Turning now to reactive community relations organizations as described in our taxonomy, these can be subdivided broadly into two groups: the longer-established bodies (Women Together for Peace, the Community of the Peace People, the Peace and Reconciliation Group [Derry]), and the more recently formed groups (the Peace Train Organization, Enniskillen Together, and Families Against Intimidation and Terror). While it is accepted that much good public-spirited work has been performed by such organizations—some of which is physically dangerous, voluntary, and unacknowledged—their reactive role, by definition, has contributed nothing to long-term community relations goals. Salient questions emerge in particular with regard to the newer groups. Has the Peace Train Organization done anything more than publicize the disruption of rail services? What role is there for Enniskillen Together over and above its proper commemoration function? Is Families Against Intimidation and Terror any more than a travel and employment service arranging for victims' relocation? Such questions are not meant to devalue the contributions made by these organizations but to highlight a lack of vision in community relations work. This lack of strategic vision stems, to some extent, from the context within which such organizations emerged. The nature of their day-to-day activities relies on the level of voluntary commitment of individual members, some of which is motivated by bitter and emotional personal experiences. The resultant priority, to create public awareness of injustice and terrorism, creates a scenario in which intergroup contact becomes largely superficial, with most participants being unaware of the political and religious affiliations of others.

CONCLUSIONS

The approach of the Central Community Relations Unit, thus far, has been to support those programs which can demonstrate, on paper at least, a commitment to improving community relations in Northern Ireland. Objectives set by the Unit are nonprescriptive and have been broadly interpreted. This has generated a wide vari-

ety of projects. Most can claim to promote contact between Protestants and Catholics, though not all enhance community relations or engender mutual understanding among participants. Indeed, the above review lends support to the argument that contact can be ineffectual or, more worrisome, counterproductive, if it is not augmented by efforts to expand intergroup as opposed to interpersonal relations. The most successful projects evaluated are those which satisfy the conditions for successful contact as proposed by Hewstone and Brown.

Superordinate goals, cooperation, cross-cutting social categories, and equal status through adjusted expectations are all presented by Hewstone and Brown as equally important in providing a context for successful interaction between disparate groups. The research review, while recognizing the value of these conditions, suggests that the best results are achieved when they are prioritized according to the stage of development reached by the participant groups. Ideally, when a group has not previously engaged in contact work, but is committed to doing so, it is important to address expectation states. This is best done at an intragroup level through single identity projects, where fears and prejudices can be addressed in a safe environment prior to contact. Following this, and addressing the issue of contact, it is important to see that the condition of cross-cutting social cleavages is met. This ensures that the selection of participants reflects common characteristics (such as class or shared interests) which subordinate potentially volatile religious and political identities. Issues with which both groups identify, such as sports, music, art, or community development concerns, can provide a context for exploratory and tentative contact at a noncontentious intergroup level. Eventually, when relationships have been established, differences can be addressed. Although expectation states and cross-cutting social cleavages lay the foundation for interaction, superordinate goals can be employed to galvanize participants on the basis of their shared interests. Cooperation is less of a condition than an outcome of this process, shifting the focus from intragroup to intergroup activity. To ensure optimum success, the research review suggests that

Hewstone and Brown's conditions might be best presented as a continuum in which expectations and cross-cutting social cleavages are inputs, superordinate goals are part of the process, and cooperation is the desired output. Necessary for the success of this approach is a commitment to the type of development proposed by McCartney wherein intracommunity and basic level contact work progress at a pace which is acceptable to all participants. The ultimate aim is to promote meaningful interaction between Protestants and Catholics at the intergroup level.

The approach to community relations at the macro level in Northern Ireland thus far has been to support grass-roots initiatives that can demonstrate a commitment to addressing the community relations problem largely through contact work. Government policy toward funding in this relatively new area has been sufficiently flexible to allow for a process that can build upon trial and error. The challenge now confronting practitioners and policymakers alike is to hone and refine much of the existing practice at the individual project level to best meet macro community relations objectives. An urgent need for reflection on rudimentary approaches to cross-community contact now exists. Effective contact can lead to mutual understanding; segregation only heightens mistrust and breeds fear, creating an environment in which terrorism can flourish.

NOTES

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23. For further details, see Colin Knox and Joanne Hughes, "Community Relations: A Research Review" (unpublished report, Centre for Research in Public Policy and Management, University of Ulster, October 1994).
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